

Time to lead on pipeline; Trans Mountain

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Body

The Trudeau government has positioned itself as taking the "middle way" in the increasingly bitter fight over whether to build a pipeline that would give Alberta oil an outlet to the sea.

The problem with being in the middle, of course, is that you risk getting crunched between those who've staked out extreme positions on both sides. And as the fight over the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline heats up, the Liberals are indeed being targeted by both those who would give the energy companies a free pass and those who will never approve any pipeline under any circumstances.

It's a dangerous, uncomfortable spot to be in. But the fact remains that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has taken essentially the right approach to this thorny problem. And despite the crisis unleashed this week by Kinder Morgan's threat to kill the Trans Mountain project, he's still right.

He's right that a project already approved by both the federal and British Columbia governments should be allowed to proceed. The B.C. government of NDP Premier John Horgan should not be allowed to essentially negate the decision of its Liberal predecessor by throwing up new obstacles at every turn. Nor can it be allowed to defy the federal government in an area where Ottawa clearly has jurisdiction.

Trudeau is also right that green-lighting Trans Mountain must be part of a meaningful national approach to the pressing issue of climate change. That involves, among other things, putting a price on carbon and making sure Alberta is part of the solution. Attempting to simply shut down the biggest energy-producing province won't work and would be disastrous for national unity.

In the short run, the Trudeau government needs to lower the temperature on the issue. It needs to find a way to give Kinder Morgan assurances that the law will be followed and it has a reasonable prospect that its multi-billion-dollar investment in Trans Mountain isn't just money down the drain.

In that regard, inviting Horgan and Alberta Premier Rachel Notley to meet with the prime minister in Ottawa on Sunday is a smart move. Both premiers need to cool their rhetoric. Notley, for one, should hold off on any retaliatory measures against B.C., such as shutting off oil flows that would raise prices at the pump in Vancouver. That would be provocative and quite possibly illegal.

Ottawa and Alberta could also take a financial stake in Trans Mountain, sharing the risk with Kinder Morgan. And the federal government could ask the Supreme Court for a quick ruling on the key legal issues (with B.C. agreeing to accept the outcome). All that should persuade the company not to pull the plug on the pipeline, as it has warned it may do by May 31.

It certainly won't guarantee that the project will be built on schedule, given that protesters will no doubt do everything they can to stop it and the minority Horgan government hangs by a thread, propped up by three Green

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Party MLAs who are committed to killing Trans Mountain. But it would prevent escalation of the situation to the point where Alberta feels it has been fundamentally betrayed.

Because, make no mistake, turning Alberta into a national pariah would be a disaster. Those who argue that the oilsands should simply be isolated, strangled and shut down entirely to save the planet are kidding themselves. It may make them feel like virtuous climate warriors, but it won't have the effect they say they want. The opposite, in fact.

Federal backing for Trans Mountain was never a given. The Trudeau government killed another proposed pipeline, the Northern Gateway project from Alberta to Kitimat, B.C., and allowed the planned Energy East line to die. The Kinder Morgan project is by far the safest route (it involves expanding an existing pipeline), and approving it came as part of an understanding with the Notley government.

In return for allowing Alberta's oil to flow to the coast for export to Asian markets, Notley signed up for the most ambitious climate plan her province has ever seen. It involves phasing out coal-fired power plants, capping oilsands emissions, and introducing a carbon tax. That's key to the Trudeau government's drive to bring in a national carbon pricing scheme, undoubtedly the most efficient long-term way to reduce emissions and fight climate change.

The carbon pricing plan is already under big pressure. Doug Ford, for one, promises to scrap Ontario's cap-and-trade system if he becomes premier on June 7. Killing the Trans Mountain line would destroy public support in Alberta for such schemes, and make it almost certain that Notley would lose power next year to Alberta's United Conservatives under Jason Kenney. Then watch out.

The simple fact is that fighting climate change is a political issue, not just a technical one. Hectoring people or destroying the industries they rely on for their livelihoods isn't going to work. In a democracy broad public buy-in is needed, and the Trudeau government has been trying valiantly to bring people along with a carbon pricing plan that can be ramped up over time.

It isn't enough, for sure, but it's a big step in the right direction. Driving a stake through its heart by turning Alberta from an ally into an enemy of effective climate action would be foolish in the extreme.

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